

# The influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's neoplastic work

## La influencia de la teosofía sobre la obra neoplástica de Mondrian

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### Abstract

The influence of Theosophy in the symbolist painting of Mondrian (1908-1911) has been unanimously recognized. There is not, however, the same consensus with respect to the influence of theosophy in his neoplastic period.

There is a relationship between Mondrian's theoretical writing and his practical work, but no proportionality. Mondrian's theoretical discourse is not limited to painting and touches on other arts and disciplines (architecture, urbanism). Mondrian will define a complex – philosophical? – system whose final goal will be to completely transform the human visual environment. That is to say that the area covered by his theoretical discourse widely exceeds that of his practical activity (painting).

The goal of this article is to try to delimit the scope of Theosophy's influence on Mondrian's work during his neoplastic period, in his theoretical writing and in his practical production.

**Keywords:** Mondrian, Theosophy, Hegel, neoplasticism, *De Stijl*.

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### Resumen

La influencia de la teosofía en la pintura simbolista de Mondrian (1908-1911) es unánimemente reconocida. No existe el mismo consenso respecto a la influencia de la teosofía durante su periodo neoplástico.

Existe relación entre los escritos teóricos de Mondrian y su obra práctica, pero no proporcionalidad. El discurso teórico de Mondrian no se limita a la pintura, sino que alcanza a otras artes y disciplinas (la arquitectura, la ciudad). Mondrian va a definir un complejo sistema -¿filosófico?- cuyo objetivo final será la transformación de todo el entorno visual del ser humano. Es decir, el ámbito de su discurso teórico supera ampliamente el de su actividad práctica (la pintura).

El objetivo de este artículo es el de tratar de acotar el alcance de la influencia de la teosofía en la obra de Mondrian de su periodo neoplástico, tanto en sus escritos teóricos como en su pintura.

**Palabras clave:** Mondrian, teosofía, Hegel, neoplasticismo, *De Stijl*.

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## 1. Introduction: Mondrian and Theosophy

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) received a strict religious education from his father, a traditional and militant Calvinist. On May 25, 1909, Mondrian abandons the Protestant church and joins the Dutch Theosophical Society.

The Theosophical Society was one of the spiritual movements that arose in Western society at the end of the 19th century. It was founded in 1875 by a Russian fortune-teller named Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. In broad lines, the theosophical doctrine is an amalgam of different philosophical currents and different religions: it aims to reconcile East and West. Theosophy tries to act as a bridge between the existing divide between the Western church and scientific progress by integrating science into a conglomerate formed by religion, philosophy and art, all with the same goal: explain the diversity and multiplicity of the universe that theosophists resolve through evolution.

The Theosophical Society was founded in the United States but quickly spread throughout Europe. Theosophy had an immediate influence on art, particularly in the Netherlands. Forty Dutch artists participated in the exposition organized in 1904 in Amsterdam, for the Theosophical Society's International Convention, which gives a good idea of how well the theosophical doctrine was received in Dutch artistic circles.

There is a series of data that allow us to trace Mondrian's relationship with Theosophy: Piet Mondrian was a member of the Theosophical Society till his death; when the painter moved to Paris –at the end of 1911–, he initially stayed at the French Theosophical Society's headquarters; when in September 1938, due to the imminent outbreak of the Second World War, Mondrian abandoned Paris to move to London, the Dutch painter took the time to change his membership from the French Theosophical Society to the English one; when he died in New York, in 1944, one of the few documents he had with him was his Theosophical Society membership card; and, lastly, the few books he kept with him until his death are practically all theosophists –Blavatsky, Steiner, Schoenmaekers.

The figures listed do not demonstrate, however, the possible influence of Theosophy had on Mondrian's painting or his theoretical writing in his neoplastic period.

The relationship between Theosophy and Mondrian's work can be summarized in the following way: on the one hand, there is no proof, or signs, that might allow us to venture any type of intention or goal related to Theosophy in Mondrian's painting before his symbolist period; on the other, the influence Theosophy had on Mondrian's painting during his symbolist period – from 1908 to 1911 – has been convincingly demonstrated by Welsh (1971). Lastly, there is no consensus on how much influence

Theosophy had on Mondrian's neoplastic period, even though that influence has been accepted.

### ***1.1. Theosophy and Mondrian's theoretical discourse in his neoplastic period***

Theosophy's influence on Mondrian's theoretical discourse after his symbolist period can be traced in his personal correspondence and his articles and notes or drafts. In 1914, he commissioned by the Dutch journal *Theosophia* for an article on art. The article doesn't go to print but, as Blotkamp shows (1994: 77-81), we can get an idea of it from the two books of sketches the artist completes from 1912 to 1914 and Mondrian's correspondence from that same period. The Dutch painter feels the need to theoretically justify his thoughts and recognizes the influence that Theosophy had on his conception of art.

The influence of Theosophy can also be traced in the articles Mondrian will publish in the journal *De Stijl*. Before publishing those articles, Mondrian let some friends, like Van der Leek, Van Doesburg and Assendelft read them. In the extant letter from Mondrian to Assendelft (Blotkamp; 1994: 117), dated January 26, 1917, he instructs his friend on how to read the introduction to 'The New Plastic in Painting': as a meeting point for the Theosophical Society. In 1917, Mondrian presented some of the first articles for 'The New Plastic in Painting' in a Theosophical Society meeting.

In February 1921, taking advantage of the fact that Rudolf Steiner was giving a lecture series in the Netherlands, Mondrian sent him a copy of his book *Le Néoplasticisme* with a clarifying note (Blotkamp; 1994: 182) wherein he explained his aim that the art described corresponded with the true theosophical and antroposophical art.

*Having read several of your books, I wonder if you could find the time to read my brochure Le Néoplasticisme, which I am enclosing. I believe that Neo-Plasticisme is the art of the foreseeable future for all true anthroposophists and theosophists. Neo-Plasticism creates harmony through the equivalence of the two extremes: the universal and the individual. The former by revelation, the latter by deduction. Art gives visual expression to the evolution of life: the evolution of the spirit and –in the reverse direction– that of matter. It was impossible to bring about an equilibrium of relationships other than by destroying the form, and replacing it by a new, universal expressive means. I would be pleased to hear your opinion on this subject, if you would like to respond. Please forgive me for writing to you in French; my command of German is insufficient.*

Very few authors dare to explore the complex texts Mondrian writes between 1917 and 1926. This is logical, since as Hans Jansen (2010) points out:

*Son texte est extraordinairement compliqué, par endroits même obscur. Il utilise une terminologie incompréhensible. Et c'est pourquoi, à ce tour, rares sont les auteurs qui se sont risqués à en résumer le contenu (le seul auteur qui ait traité en profondeur les écrits de l'artiste est Carel Blotkamp dans Mondrian: The Art of Destruction et dans 'Mondriaan als literator').*

## 1.2. Theosophy and Mondrian's neoplastic painting

After his symbolist period, starting in 1911, some authors – like Bois (1993, 1994), Champa (1985), Cheetham (1991), Golding (2000) and many others – tend to minimize the influence Theosophy had on Mondrian's painting, mainly in his neoplastic period.

From our point of view, trying to determine the influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's neoplastic painting only analyzing his pictorial work could lead to erroneous or incomplete conclusions. Exclusively formal analyses conclude that neoplasticism is simply a geometrized and abstract version of cubism.

However, if there were a relationship between Theosophy and Mondrian's painting, one must look in his writing since it is there where the Dutch painter theoretically justifies his pictorial findings. The author –together with Douroux (1980)– who has most closely studied the texts of Mondrian –Blotkamp (1994: 171)– concludes that the influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's neoplastic painting is unquestionable:

*As we shall see, Mondrian did not distance himself from his old articles of faith; on the contrary, his Neo-Plastic work, which came to full fruition in Paris, may be seen as the ripe fruit of his theosophical thinking.*

Despite this proclamation, as Bois (1995) points out, the demonstration of the relationship between neoplastic painting and Theosophy isn't exactly forthcoming.

*In fact Blotkamp's treatment of the theosophical issue mainly concerns Mondrian's earlier work (up until the grotesque Evolution of 1911), and, if anything, one could scold him for failing to deliver on his promise to demonstrate the continuing importance of this religious pseudoscience for Mondrian's later production.*

## 2. Mondrian: a peculiar theosophist

Mondrian had a tortuous relationship with the Theosophical Society. Initially the Dutch painter wants to collaborate with the organization but he soon began to have serious doubts regarding the society and most of the theosophists in general, undoubtedly due to the terrible reception his ideas about art had had. Mondrian's disappointments start to pile up. In 1914, his article on art, which he was commissioned to write for the Dutch journal Theosophia, was rejected as excessively revolutionary for the group of theosophist artists who for the most part identified theosophic art with symbolism.

This first disappointment leads Mondrian to start to distinguish between Theosophy, whose principles he holds to be unquestionable, and the theosophists – many of whom have, in his opinion, an 'incorrect' idea of theosophical doctrine, especially insofar as it applies to the field of art –. This distinction is clear in a letter from 1914 that Mondrian sent to the painter Lodewijk Schelfhout – a Catholic with whom he discussed spiritual matters – after Theosophia refused to publish his article (Blotkamp; 1994: 77).

*You write that you could never be a Theosophist. Well, I suppose I could say the same thing, if you're referring to what most theosophists are. But that does not alter the fact that I believe that the principles of Theosophy are true, and that it leads to clarity in one's spiritual development [...] I can understand how the Catholic doctrine may lead to vagueness, but Theosophy, which is a spiritual science, can never do so.*

In spite of this, Mondrian perseveres in the distribution of his writing and his theory of art from inside the organization. In 1916, he is named in the Theosophical Society's Bulletin as a possible member of the jury that will examine projects for the new front-page of Theosophia. In 1917, as we've seen, he presents some of the articles from 'The New Plastic in Painting' at a Theosophical Society meeting. These theoretical writings were not very well received; his friend Cornelis Spoor, who had been a heavy influence on his theosophical beliefs, dedicated them harsh words.

The last effort Mondrian makes to get neoplastic recognized as the true theosophical art does not take place inside the organization, but through Rudolf Steiner, who had left the Theosophical Society in 1914, but who was considered among the theosophists as an authority. Above we saw the letter Mondrian sends him. Steiner doesn't deign to respond, which is Mondrian's final disappointment, and the certainty that neoplastic art will never officially be considered the theosophical art form.

Although there was no artistic school that identified with Theosophy, practically all Dutch painters that belonged to the Theosophical Society were symbolists. For Mondrian, art could not depend hierarchically on an external discourse; it could not be illustrative. Mondrian admonished the theosophist-artists who circumscribed themselves to formal (theoretically taken from texts by Blavatsky and others) or symbolic questions like the use of triangles, certain numbers, etc.

*Ancient wisdom represented the fundamental inward-outward relationship by the cross. Neither this symbol, however, nor any other symbol, can be the plastic means for abstract-real painting: the symbol constitutes a new limitation, on the one hand, and is too absolute, on the other (Mondrian, 1918a: 45-46).*

For Mondrian, not even apparently neoplastic art – that is to say, theoretically arising from the principles he defends in *De Stijl* – is valid if it finds its justification in formal coincidences or anecdotes from the theosophical doctrine. Mondrian's devastating criticism of the 'incorrect' use Vantongerloo makes of Theosophy makes this clear.

*'I already wrote to you that I corresponded with him about colors. And now he writes me that he has invented a whole system about eternity – o no, I mean about unity – based on the seven colors and seven tones!!! You know, he uses all seven of them too, damn it, just like the rainbow. You already told me it was ugly. Now he, with his Belgian intellect, sets up an auxiliary system which is, in my opinion, based on nature. He has not the faintest idea of the difference between in the way of nature and in the way of art. I now see how well I discriminated between the unconscious and the conscious: he is computing everything with his ordinary consciousness... I had only expected something of him as a sculptor, and to tell me technical things about color... He behaves like an ordinary Theosophist.'* (Letter from Mondrian to Van Doesburg, from September 5, 1920, reproduced in Hoek (1982: 63)).

Vantongerloo was strongly influenced by the writings of Schoenmaekers, but, unlike in Mondrian's case, his main interest was in applying the mathematics of 'Christosophism' to obtain an objective work of art. Vantongerloo uses in his paintings a series of seven colors, without any other justification for his choice than the fact that this range coincides with the number of colors in the rainbow and the theosophists' 'magical' number.

Mondrian feels that no artistic style that is based on illustrating anecdotal questions related to the theosophical doctrine (be it symbolism or Vantongerloo's particular neoplasticism) can be the true theosophical art.

### 3. Neoplastic art as defined by Mondrian in his writings

#### 3.1. *Traditional art according to Mondrian*

In several of the articles he published in *De Stijl*, Mondrian analyzes the role traditional art has played up to now. For the Dutch painter, traditional art has always arisen, regardless of the time period, as a consequence of an imbalance inside of man. Artists – people with a higher sensibility than their contemporaries – perceive, through intuition, not rationale thought, the imbalance between man and nature, between matter and spirit.

Theosophy emerges precisely as a response to that imbalance. The theosophical doctrine attempts to reconcile the two most influential philosophical doctrines of the 19th century: on the one hand, German idealism, which proclaims the preeminence of the spirit over matter, and on the other, positivism, where perception is dominated by the spirit. Theosophy seeks to arrive at a compromise between both movements, seeks to integrate perception and thought, the natural world and the spiritual work, science and religion.

To explain the origin of the absence of balance between matter and spirit, the theosophists (Blavatsky as well as Steiner) look back on times far removed and pronounce all types of mythical explanations based on the supposed existence of lost civilizations and continents. Although scientifically implausible, ultimately the theosophists do nothing more than describe the change from paleolithic to neolithic, the change from a hunter-gatherer society to a productive one. But, especially, associated with this major change, we see the emergence of animism, the adoration of spirits, the faith in souls and worship of the dead or of duality. As Hauser would say (2005: 6): "*Animism divides the world into a reality and a suprareality, in a visible world of phenomenon and an invisible spiritual world, into a mortal body and an immortal soul.*"

The references that appear in Mondrian's writing on this subject – recurring in the theosophists – are continuous. For him, when man begins to take consciousness of his individuality, that is, when the concept of spirit emerges, like the rational soul or thought, independently of the physical body it occupies, a conflict also emerges, a confrontation that makes it impossible to find the primitive harmony.



*There can be equilibrium in primitive life where mind is so undeveloped as not to oppose the natural; but as soon as soul and mind develop, in other words, as soon as consciousness develops in man, while the natural lags behind –because of the unequal duality– equilibrium is impossible. (Mondrian, 1918b: 56).*

In his analysis of the origin of imbalance, Mondrian quotes Steiner – one of the very few quotes from a theosophist in his writings:

*The remote past shows that transcendence of the natural is a general evolutionary process. In the Lemurian and Atlantan periods, man was still so dependent upon the environment that the physical possibility of sleep, for instance, depending on the rising and setting of the sun. Man lived in harmony with nature rhythm. When, however, individual consciousness began to develop in man, there automatically ensued a disharmony between man and nature. As this disharmony increased, nature drew further outside of man (Dr. Rudolf Steiner) (Mondrian, 1918c: 49).*

The recognition of the individual spirit in the man, according to Mondrian, brings him to two confrontations. First internal opposition will arise between his spiritual part and his physical part (his body). The dual character that man discovers in himself, independently of the possible preponderance of one part over the other, is not visible on the outside, that is, there is a second confrontation, between man and nature.

These confrontations or oppositions are defined by Mondrian as ‘imbalance between matter and spirit,’ ‘disharmony between man and his surrounding,’ or simply ‘the tragic in life.’

For Mondrian, the traditional artist will try to recover the primitive harmony through the work of art. Therein the intuitive search for balance and harmony absent from real life is materialized. The work emerges from the imbalance and its main objective is usually to provide serenity, a temporary harmony for the artist. The work is ‘own reflection, own enjoyment’ for the artist.

*Arising from the tragic of life –caused by the dominance in and around us of the physical (the naturalistic) –art expresses the yet imperfect state of our deepest ‘being’. The latter (as ‘intuition’) seeks to narrow the gap –never to be completely bridged as long as the world endures –that separates it from the material-as-nature: it seeks to change disharmony to harmony (Mondrian, 1922: 167).*

The work of art is, has been for centuries, a temporary substitute that reconciles human beings with external life. Art, as Mondrian says, has become a life's refuge, the ideal representation of something unobtainable in reality: balance, harmony. There had been a rupture between art and life.

### **3.2. Neoplastic art: Goal and utopia**

Neoplastic art arises, as traditional art does, from the perception of an imbalance inside of man. However, the neoplastic art that Mondrian describes in his theoretical writing will differentiate itself from traditional art in several aspects.

Neoplastic art will try to eliminate the immediacy of the response produced in a

work of traditional art. It will introduce an indispensable intermediate step before the work of art can be realized: the artist's personal resolution of the internal conflict which presents itself.

Once personal balance was achieved, the neoplastic work of art should be the objective reflection from which intuition has been eliminated or reduced to a bare minimum on the harmony found therein –what Mondrian calls the universal, the absolute, the true, the one, etc.

*Z: –(...) Increasingly the work of art speaks for itself. Personality is displaced; each work of art becomes a personality instead of each artist. Each work of art becomes another expression of the universal (Mondrian, 1919: 115-116).*

Neoplastic art will attempt to consciously represent the universal that traditional art achieved involuntarily. This is a substantial change since it implies knowledge of *the absolute*; if it the artist wants to represent it consciously it is because he knows it. Where traditional art sought after beauty and obtained – involuntarily and partially – truth, neoplastic art aims to represent 'truth' directly.

*(...) Thus we see that rational thought is in accord with the actual goal of the new painting –whether rational thought recognizes it or not. Both seek beauty not for the beautiful feelings it may arouse, but beauty as truth, that is, as plastic manifestation of pure aesthetic relationships (Mondrian, 1918d: 51).*

Neoplastic art – the objective representation of *the absolute* – is not an end unto itself, it is the means that Mondrian will try to use to change society, conferring to his discourse an unprecedented utopian and proselytizing character.

Neoplastic art will replace the role that, up to that time, religion had been playing – in Hegelian terms (art as a sensitive –intuitive– manifestation of the absolute; religion as the objective representation of the absolute).

*Art –although and end in itself, like religion– is the means through which we can know the universal and contemplate it in plastic form (Mondrian, 1918e: 42).*

Mondrian's neoplastic art is an instrumental art which aims high, to improve the old role of religion. For Mondrian, the balance that man looks for inside himself is not reflected in nature. The Dutch painter feels that not all men will be capable, like he is, of reaching the inner balance in an external environment that, in his opinion, does not reflect that balance.

Mondrian's work – as priest of this religious art– will consist in helping the common man reach the desired after inner balance. To that end, Mondrian plans the transformation of the entire environment: he aims to substitute nature (or non-natural environments that reproduce it, like the traditional city) with an artificial environment that reflects the balance nature lacks. In this point, his discourse surpasses – in the means, but not the ends – that of religion (including his own, Theosophy) since religion, in its endeavor to find the balance between man and nature only focused its work on the first factor: man.



Z: –(...) Increasingly the work of art speaks for itself. Personality is displaced; each Art advances where religion once led. Religion's basic content was to transform the natural; in practice, however, religion always sought to harmonize man with nature, that is, with untransformed nature. Likewise, in general, Theosophy and Antroposophy –although they already knew the basic symbol of equivalence– could never achieve the experience of equivalent relationship, achieve real, fully human harmony.

Art, on the other hand, sought this in practice (Mondrian, 1922: 169).

Mondrian wants to invert the path he has covered: his utopian labor will consist of trying to modify the entire external environment, providing the common man with the right air in which to find his inward balance.

*Neo-Plastic art loses something of the superhuman as it becomes realized in life in the form of material environment, yet retains it enough for the individual no longer to feel his petty personality but to be uplifted through beauty toward universal life (Mondrian, 1927: 208).*

By introducing art into society, by completely transforming its environment, Mondrian aims to change man. By reproducing the outward harmony, his goal is that society achieve inward harmony.

Z: – *The New Plastic, although an end in itself, leads to conscious universal vision (...)* (Mondrian, 1919: 93).

Neoplastic art's objective is to restore in man a balance with his environment, lost upon gaining consciousness of his own individuality. Neoplastic art, in other words, aims to resolve the main problem as perceived by theosophy.

*As long as the artist (as the interpreter of humanity) has not grown to his full inwardness, and as long as he is an artist rather than a (true) spiritual person, he must create an image of the inward in order to establish an opposition to himself. Only from the pure relationship between (plastically expressed) inwardness and the (most) outward (nature), can he consciously grasp the true meaning of inward and outward. Not until he (and all humanity with him) has matured to inwardness (or spirit) will this inward element in him become absolute; and only then will absolute outwardness also be necessary to form a unity (Mondrian, 1918c: 50).*

The goal is so clear and so defined that, once the work is done, neoplastic art should necessarily disappear: art will dissolve into life, will fuse with life, stepping over the abyss between art and life that characterized traditional art.

The neoplastic art that Mondrian (1922, 1926) describes in his theoretical writing is not limited to painting but rather extends to include architecture and urbanism (without a doubt more powerful instruments in the attempt to achieve an environment-wide change). For Mondrian, each and every one of the artistic disciplines should reflect the harmony ruling in the universe (and found by the artist – priest). Mondrian clearly defines the task each one of his artistic disciples needs to assume. The fundamental advantage of painting over other disciplines is its greater freedom in

reflecting harmony. Within Mondrian's complex (artistic?, religious?, philosophic?) system, painting's mission is to act as a guide for the rest of the arts (show how harmony should be represented) and to disappear once the mission has been completed. Each discipline will dissolve into the next as its mission is completed, painting into architecture and architecture into urbanism, linking together in a process that closes with the complete transformation of the environment, thanks to the heroic and planned suicide of art.

#### 4. Origin of the concept of *absolute* in the writings of Mondrian

The possible influence of Hegel's philosophy on Mondrian's writing has been studied at great length. Part of his discourse reveals the influence of the German philosopher: the idea of art as an intuitive representation of the absolute; the work of art as the reconciliation between opposites; etc. However, in our opinion, some anecdotal coincidences have prevented putting the focus on areas where the differences are fundamental. The terms they use are the same (absolute, nature, spirit, etc.), but the meanings they apply are quite different.

##### 4.1. *Hegel's influence on Mondrian*

The influence of Hegel's philosophy on Mondrian's writing does not come from direct study of the German philosopher's works. As Thissen (1994) has demonstrated, the knowledge some Dutch cultural circles had of Hegel's philosophy was rarely directly learned; there was usually an intermediary: the Dutch 'philosopher' G. J. P. J. Bolland (1854-1922).

Thanks to Bolland, his writings and his conferences throughout the country, Hegelianism flooded Dutch cultural life at the turn of the 20th century.

The circles where Hegelianism triumphed were not precisely the universities, but rather countless associations of all kinds that sprang up in the Netherlands at the beginning of the century related to the new answers sought after the crisis that science had provoked in the different religions. Many of these movements had to adapt their discourse to not contradict the predominant Hegelian current that had triumphed in Holland at Bolland's hand. As Thissen describes (1994), the theosophical movement was among those movements:

*On account of his personality, Bolland succeeded to bringing more unity into de diverse and heterogeneous affirmative movement. Many freethinkers, ethical socialists, anarchists, Rosicrucians and theosophists were converted to Hegelianism, or more precisely, to Bollandism. The phrase 'In Holland people speak Bolland' was very popular at the time. Rival systems of thought had to adapt their programs to Hegelianism in order to prevent their members from leaving. In 1907-1908 for example, the Amsterdam Theosophical Association invited the German philosopher Rudolf Steiner to organize a curriculum on "Theosophy and Hegel."*

The interpretation that Bolland developed of Hegel's philosophy was relatively dogmatic and mystical, and some of his ideas might have influenced Mondrian's

discourse. Bolland's contempt for art, for example, may have been critical when Mondrian decided to eliminate intuition from it and make it religious; or the use that Bolland admits for religion and art, as tools to dominate the mass from a higher level, could be similar to the use that Mondrian makes of his 'religious art'. There is no proof, however, that there was any direct influence through Bolland himself.

What we do know is that Mondrian's knowledge of Hegel's philosophy, like that of many of his compatriots, was through Bolland's slightly dogmatic interpretation and not direct study of the German philosopher's works.

#### 4.2. *The influence of Theosophy on Mondrian's concept of absolute*

Our aim is not in any way to determine precisely how much influence each of the different theosophical writings that the Dutch painter was familiar with had on Mondrian's discourse. We simply want to show that Mondrian used different theosophical sources and that his texts can seem baffling if their origin is unknown. The confusion grows when Mondrian, in an attempt to make his writings more rigorous, cites philosophers (Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Spinoza, Voltaire) but hardly makes any explicit references to Theosophy or its main authors.

The influence Schoenmaekers had on Mondrian (and on Van de Leek and, in general, the De Stijl group) has been studied in detail by Jaffé (1958). Like the theosophist he was, Schoenmaekers has a dualistic vision of reality, and analyzed pairs of opposites: masculine-feminine, dynamic-static, inwards-outward, etc. He summarized all of these pairs of opposites in a fundamental pair: horizontal-vertical. Using rectilinear shapes, and only primary colors (blue, red and yellow) – another of the main characteristics of the neoplastic language – are supported by Schoenmaekers' theory. Although not improbable, Schoenmaekers' influence on Mondrian's theoretical writing has yet to be demonstrated. When in May 1918 Van Doesburg suggested to Mondrian that his text 'The New Plastic in Painting' had been influenced by Schoenmaekers, Mondrian denied it, although he recognizes the enormous influence Blavatsky's writing has had:

*I got everything from the Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky), not from Schoenmaekers. Even if he does say the same things. (Letter from Mondrian to Van Doesburg, from May 1918, reproduced in Blotkamp (1994: 111)).*

But Mondrian didn't only drink from original sources. Welsh (1971) has demonstrated the influence of Rudolf Steiner, German theosophist and anthroposophist. Independently of a possible purification of the origin of the influences of Blavatsky, Steiner or Schoenmaekers, their influence is clear in Mondrian's neoplastic writing.

As we have seen, the neoplastic as defined in Mondrian's writing should in the most objective and rational way possible transmit, represent the image the artist has before executing the work of art of *the absolute*. The concept of absolute that Mondrian uses has, in our point of view, its origin in theosophical doctrine and not at all in a rigorous philosophical discourse.

The theosophical doctrine explains the diversity and multiplicity of the universe from the *radiation* of the One Life (the Eternal Essence, absolute Truth, Great Center,

etc.). This One Life is able to *radiate* the diverse thanks to the polarization that exists in its interior between two poles: spirit and matter. According to H. P. Blavatsky (1999: 16):

*The 'Manifested Universe,' therefore, is pervaded by duality, which is, as it were, the very essence of its existence as 'manifestation'. But just as the opposite poles of subject and object, spirit and matter, are but aspects of the One Unity in which they are synthesized, so, in the manifested Universe, there is 'that' which links spirit to matter, subject to object.*

For the theosophical doctrine, all of creation derives from the Absolute and reflects, in one way or another, the polarized nature (spirit-matter) of the Radiating Center. Everything that exists is a combination of the Original Spirit (or Logos, Intelligence, Cosmic Center) and Original Matter (or Cosmic Substance). As Blavatsky (1995: 15) states in *The Secret Doctrine*:

*Just as pre-Cosmic Ideation is the root of all individual consciousness, so pre-Cosmic Substance is the substratum of matter in the various grades of its differentiation.*

For the theosophists, nature and spirit are manifestations of the same original force, of a whole (universal order, cosmic order, etc.). This conception has much more to do with the animist conception of ancient Oriental religions than with Hegel's idealism. For example, with the animist conception of the ancient Vedas and Upanishads texts, where the subject is held to be inhabited by the infinite Brahman, infinite substance of which nature is another manifestation, and in which both (subject and nature) fuse.

Mondrian still strives to decode an existing nature, outside our own experience, independently of the subject. His intention is to apprehend reality, taken in the Aristotelian sense (Mondrian uses the Greek philosophy idea of *materia prima*). This idea is based, however, on a conception of material reality prior to the idealism initiated by Kant, of which Hegel is the highest exponent. For Mondrian, outward reality is still an objective reality independent of understanding and his task is simply to try to find what all sensitive objects (individuals) have in common, distinguishing in this underlying structure a (universal) order that also reaches the subject judging it.

*(...) If consistency of style in the manner of art excludes the particular appearance of objects from the plastic expression, this is not a negation of the object themselves. For it expresses the universal –the core of all things, and thus actually represents things more completely (Mondrian, 1917: 33).*

*It is the representation of the universal that, as philosophy also teaches, forms the very core of the human spirit even though it is veiled by our individuality (Mondrian, 1917: 31).*

## 5. How should neo-plastic art represent *the absolute*?

There is an tremendous disparity between the scope of Mondrian's theoretical writing during his neoplastic period – the modification of an entire visible landscape – and his practical work which is limited almost entirely to painting. Painting, however, is

important since it falls to it to pave the road for the rest of the disciplines (architecture, urbanism) in the planned modification of the environment.

### 5.1. *Dialectics: Fundamental characteristic of neoplastic painting*

As we have seen, for Mondrian *the absolute* is the original force from which, for the theosophists, everything derives. Art, as a reflection of *the absolute*, should be the image of what Theosophy calls the Radiating Center, and which Mondrian refers to as the *one*, *the absolute*, the universal, truth, etc. The artist then becomes a sort of translator of a higher reality that each work of art repeats incessantly. The representation of this Radiating Center should reflect its fundamental characteristics (without any anecdotal or symbolic questions).

The Radiating Center transmits to its creation – man or nature – its own dual character.

*Thus understood, the opposition of spirit and nature in man is seen as constantly forming a new unity –which constantly reflects more purely the original unity (unity, in its most profound essence, radiates: it is. The radiation of unity's being wrecks itself upon the physical –and thus gives rise to life and art. Life and art must therefore be radiation ...), out of which the opposites, spirit and nature, manifest themselves –in time– as a duality.*

*Pure vision shows us this original unity as the enduring force in all things, as the universally shared force common to all things. This deepest universal element was termed by Aristotle substance –that which is, the thing-in-itself, existing of itself, independent of those accidents of size, form, or qualities which constitute only the outwardness by which substance is manifested. It is only substance that makes externality into what it is for us (Mondrian, 1918c: 48).*

Mondrian considers that by representing *the absolute* (the Radiating Center) we should expressly show the nature that allows its creation: that is, its polarized character.

*Z: –(...) Pure unity is plastically expressed as equivalent duality. Therefore, if we want to express true unity, we must express it plastically through such an apparent duality (Mondrian, 1919: 95).*

Mondrian will define the polarity produced between matter and spirit as a relationship of balanced tension which he will call the *defined relationship*.

*Y : – From what you have just said, I can better understand why the New Plastic pays so much attention to equilibrated relationship. However, to meet the objection that a simple aesthetic expression of equilibrated relationship is not art, it might be even better, for example, to seek of 'aesthetic plastic expression of the universal.'*

*Z: – Truth is many-sided, and in order to describe it as completely as possible, one must illuminate its many sides. Your definition also is good, provided that it is properly understood, and the New Plastic often employs it. Improperly understood, however, it could be taken to mean that the individual is of no account at all –and that is not possible in art. The determinate plastic expression of the universal is inconceivable without pure equilibrium, and equilibrium is inconceivable without duality. Duality expressed*

*relationship. If only one thing is expressed, then the particular, whatever it may be, dominates. The determinate plastic expression of the universal is the expression neither of the one nor of the other, but is the plastic expression of equilibrated relationship between the two. Therefore, the aesthetic plastic expression of pure equilibrated relationship can be art because it includes everything (Mondrian, 1919: 113-114).*

The work of art, as a replica of the Origin, should reproduce the conflict and should be the image of the resolution in equilibrium between opposing elements. The image of harmony cannot be static, it cannot be the image of a result. In the work of art the resolution should come about and the elements that represent the conflicting poles should appear.

The fundamental tool that Mondrian uses in order to represent harmony is dialectics: two levels of simple elements –that inevitably appear in his neoplastic painting between 1921 and 1932– among which several simultaneous oppositions are produced (line/plane, colour/no colour, vertical/horizontal, etc.).

## 6. Conclusions

Mondrian's theosophical beliefs will exercise a crucial influence over his neoplastic work: in his theoretical writing and in his painting.

In his neoplastic period, Mondrian has lost faith in the theosophical movement and, in particular, in theosophist artists. But he has not lost his faith in the principles of Theosophy. In this period, Mondrian will attempt to define, in his writings, the true theosophical art.

Before undertaking the work of art, the new neoplastic artist should have achieved his own inward equilibrium. Then the work of art will not be understood as a process based on intuition and will aim to become the objective image of the understanding the artist has achieved.

Mondrian will try to help common man access his own inward harmony. To that end he will propose transforming the entire natural environment, turning it into an artificial environment that reproduces equilibrium on the outside. All of our environment should reflect, should be a conscious image of the common origin of all creation: of the *absolute*. In this balanced environment, the common man can more easily attain his inner equilibrium.

The Radiating Center from which for the theosophists everything is derived, has a dual, abstract – not anthropomorphic –, and dynamic nature (tense equilibrium between the two conflicting poles). Since neoplastic art should be the reproduction ad infinitum of that idea, it is undoubtable that the relationship between neoplasticism and Theosophy is fundamental – underlying.

Formally, certainly, many other variables have their influence. Mondrian found in cubism (in the last phase of the analytical stage) the appropriate tool to reflect dialectics. The artist reinterpreted and simplified the two independent levels seen in cubist painting (topic and weave), refining them until he found the simple elements (colour and non colour rectangular planes and lines) that would allow him to show the fundamental dialectical relationships that, in his opinion, must be reflected in all pieces of art.



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